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ABSTRACT

From a synthesis of findings culled from a study that examined partnerships of families and communities with middle schools at multiple sites, researchers derived eight "lessons" that can help foster understanding of the nature of family-school partnerships in the middle grades. Researchers also elaborated implications of these lessons, which are highlighted by examples from specific middle schools. The lessons are: (1) the stakes are high and immediate for everyone in the middle grades, and schools can create programs that respond to the unique needs of middle-grade students and their parents; (2) challenges can become opportunities for parent and family involvement, implying that schools can make available specific educational opportunities geared to the interests of middle-grade families; (3) relationships are the essence of middle-grade family and community involvement, implying that schools can encourage direct contact between middle-grade families and teachers; (4) responsibility and decision making are shared by many individuals, including the child, implying that schools need to include families, teachers, and students in decisions about curriculum and instruction; (5) sustained parent, family, and community involvement depend on active advocacy by leaders, implying that schools need to look for a whole array of community connections and to use creative approaches in defining leadership and solving problems; (6) a system of supports for teachers and school staff is critical to parent and family involvement, implying that schools can provide professional development on promising practices and family involvement programs; (7) families need connections to the curriculum, implying that families need to create an environment that values achievement; and (8) schools need connections to the community, implying that schools need to seek opportunities to invite the community to participate in school activities. (BC)



Parent, Family, and Community Involvement in the Middle Grades

Barry Rutherford and Shelley H. Billig

A research project that was focused on family and community involvement in comprehensive districtwide programs, school restructuring, and adult and child learning programs in the middle grades provided an opportunity to examine nine local sites that presented unique challenges for family and community involvement. Two central questions were explored at all sites. First, how do schools and districts involve families and the community as partners in education reform? Second, how do schools and districts create partnerships that acknowledge the roles of the family, school, and community in the growth of the child, and how do these systems interact? By synthesizing findings across all nine sites, researchers developed a set of eight "lessons" which enrich our understanding of the critical and complex nature of school-family partnerships in the middle grades.

Lesson 1: *The stakes are high and immediate for everyone in the middle grades.* In the middle grades, students make personal and educational decisions with serious consequences. They wrestle with issues of authority, independence, changing family relationships, and increased visibility in the community, all of which require that students practice social skills for community participation. These challenges, coupled with the perception that the middle-grade years are a watershed time for young adolescents, create a compelling case for the critical importance of the middle grades.

Implications. Schools can create programs that respond to the unique needs of middle-grade students and their families. Communities can publicize positive reports about and provide positive interventions for middle-grade students. Families can engage middle-grade children in active decision making. In Fort Worth, for example, the Vital Link program places sixth-graders in more than 140 businesses for several hours each morning during a one-week internship. The goal is to understand career opportunities in a variety of fields through hands-on experience.

Lesson 2: *Challenges can become opportunities for parent and family involvement.* In addition to coping with the physical and emotional changes of adolescence, middle-grade students and their families must also deal with changes in the way schools operate. Communication patterns change; the student's day is fragmented, with more teachers, subjects, and extracurricular choices.

Implications. Schools can create structures that decrease the fragmentation of the school day; provide parents with

strategies to support the academic success of their middle-grade students; and make available specific educational opportunities geared to the special interests of middle-grade families. Families can serve as advocates and resources for middle-grade children. Restructuring in Shelburne, Vermont, has focused on organizing elementary and middle grades into a nine-year system, divided into three-year "communities," making it more likely that students will learn necessary social skills and parents will find middle school welcoming.

Lesson 3: *Relationships are the essence of middle-grade family and community involvement.* Schools and communities are ideal contexts for developing and fostering strong relationships with the families of middle-grade students. One-on-one communication between families and teachers, the addition of school personnel to deal with family issues, and community contact with students in their roles as consumers and workers help to build support for middle-grade schools.

Implications. Schools can encourage direct contact between middle-grade families and teachers and can create staffing patterns that support these relationships. Communities can take advantage of middle-school students' relationships with local businesses (as workers and consumers) to make supportive community connections. Families can be encouraged to build personal relationships with school staff.

Lesson 4: *Responsibility and decision making are shared by a broad array of players, including the child.* Just as adolescents' roles change during the middle grades, so do their responsibilities and decision-making strategies. School, home, and community are all places where middle-graders learn and are actively involved in positive or negative ways. Teachers, counselors, social service personnel, businesspeople, families, and students themselves can and should share responsibility and decision making with regards to the curriculum and the delivery of instruction. The challenge for middle-grade schools comes in coordinating information and efforts across a broad range of stakeholders.

Implications. Schools need to include middle-grade families, teachers, and students in decisions about curriculum and instruction; involve families and students in conferences about course-work and individual progress; and coordinate information from the school to ensure smooth communications. Families need to understand school policies and expectations to act as advocates and supporters of middle-grade students.

Lesson 5: Sustained parent, family, and community involvement depend on active advocacy by leaders. Leadership in the school and community plays a key role in fostering parent, family, and community involvement. Leaders set the tone for involvement, make it a priority, and provide the context that enables school personnel, families, community members, and businesspeople to maintain an active role in middle-grades education.

Implications. Schools need to look for a whole array of community connections; use creative approaches in defining leadership, designing programs, and solving problems; and provide a climate for success that includes making available fiscal and human resources. Communities should take an active role in making connections with schools. Families can represent the interests of middle-grade children, and they can use community connections to advocate for the school. The principal at Barret Traditional Middle School in Louisville, Kentucky, for example, views his leadership as going beyond the boundaries of the school and into the community.

Lesson 6: A system of supports for front-line workers is critical to parent and family involvement. Frontline workers—teachers and other school personnel—are key players in family involvement. Through these frontline workers families are connected to the services provided by the school or community. They need professional development, the ability and authority to make decisions about services to address family needs, structures that provide the workers themselves with social and emotional support, and other resources.

Implications. Schools can provide professional development on promising practices and family involvement programs; empower frontline workers to make key decisions that connect middle-grade families with needed services; create structures that provide social and emotional support for frontline workers; and design support systems that outline expectations and give frontline workers resources for family involvement. The Kentucky Education Reform Act mandates "Youth Service Centers" in middle schools serving economically disadvantaged students. A wide range of services are available through local agencies there.

Lesson 7: Families need connections to the curriculum. In the middle grades, multiple teachers, the increasing complexity of course content, and students' growing need for autonomy tend to weaken the tie between parents and the curriculum that existed in elementary school. Families may find that the ways in which they are involved will undergo fundamental change during the middle-grade years.

Implications. Schools need to engage families in meaningful home learning tasks; demonstrate ways for families to work with middle-grade students; and use the content and characteristics of middle-school learning experiences as starting points for family connections. Families need to create an environment that values and promotes achievement and communicate with the school and teachers about what is being taught and their child's progress. Community District 3 in New York City provides families with home learning "kits" that reinforce instruction; Parent Center staff in Natchez, Mississippi, demonstrate materials and activities that families can use to work with their children at home.

Lesson 8: Schools need connections to the community. The geographic areas served by a school broadens in the middle grades. Middle school is often located at a greater distance

from a student's "home" community; school attendance areas often draw students from several different communities. In defining their own "community," schools must recognize the unique strengths of diverse, multiethnic, and multiracial school populations in both rural and urban settings. They must implement strategies to provide multiple opportunities for the larger community to be involved in the middle grades.

Implications. Schools need to acknowledge the unique characteristics of the school community; design programs to build on its strengths; seek opportunities to invite the community to participate in school activities; and use a variety of strategies to communicate directly with the community. Communities must take an active role in school decision making. And families must find a variety of ways to participate and adopt new roles for participation. Project REACH at Beck Middle School in Georgetown, South Carolina, uses community members as instructional resources.

Conclusion

These eight lessons and accompanying examples illustrate some of the ways in which districts and middle-grade schools engage families and the community. These partnerships go beyond information exchange to foster school change and the creation of relationships that contribute to student success.

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For More Information

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